

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2019)

1. **Region:** 2 **Regional Supervisor:** Randy Arnold
Name of Applicant(s): Rebecca Mowry, Bitterroot area wildlife biologist
2. **Date:** May 2019
3. **Project Name:** Sweathouse Creek (Hackett Ranch) Conservation Easement
Type of Project: Conservation Easement
4. **Size:** 540 private acres, plus access to Bitterroot National Forest and a popular hiking trail (Sweathouse Falls)
5. **Location:** Approx. 4.5 miles west of Victor, Ravalli County, FWP Region 2
6. **Map(s):** See Figures 1-3 below.
7. **Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) – up to 10 pts.**
Currently known as the Hackett Ranch Block Management Area (Region 2 BMA #7), this property is located in Deer and Elk Hunting District (HD) 240, which has become one of the most critically threatened wildlife habitats in the Bitterroot Valley. The “west side”, as this area is known, consists of a narrow strip of foothill habitat (flat to rolling topography traditionally used for agriculture) sandwiched between the rugged Bitterroot Mountains and the Bitterroot River floodplain. Almost all of this habitat is privately owned.

The west side foothills of the Bitterroot Valley have high development value and have experienced a boom in housing development over the past 2-3 decades that has constricted wildlife habitat, particularly winter range for deer and elk. Around 1,000 elk are surveyed in this HD annually, and game damage during the winter is a chronic issue among farmers and agricultural producers in the area. The threat of current agricultural lands being converted to subdivisions is very high.

Serving as a transitional habitat between the high mountains and the valley bottom, this ranch offers one of the few opportunities in the Bitterroot for spring turkey hunting and is also popular among elk and deer hunters in the fall. Additionally, the property contains a parking area and main access route for the highly popular Sweathouse Falls trail. The Hackett family has left this access open to the public year-round via an unofficial agreement with the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF); no official easement exists to maintain this critical access

route. Placing this property in a conservation easement would not only guarantee protection of the habitat for wildlife, but ongoing access to the public for hunting, fishing, and other forms of outdoor recreation.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.

The proposed conservation easement is located entirely within the Bitterroot-Clark Fork Riparian Corridor, identified in the 2015 SWAP as a Tier I Terrestrial Focal Area due to its importance to migratory birds and as a breeding area for great blue herons and Lewis’s woodpeckers. According to the SWAP, *“though there is opportunity for restoration, it may be difficult and come at a high cost due to the large number of landowners in this Focal Area. The diverse recreational use is high, but likely is below what resources could support because of private land ownership.”* While little Bitterroot River floodplain habitat exists on the proposed conservation easement, the critical ecological connection between the large, protected landscape of the Bitterroot Mountains and the broad Bitterroot River floodplain is dependent on maintaining open space and wildlife habitat in the Bitterroot Valley foothills represented by the Hackett Ranch property.

Approximately 81% of the proposed CE is made up of Tier 1 Community Types as identified by the 2015 SWAP, including (Level 2 Landcover):

- 265 acres (49%) of Montane Grassland
- 113 acres (21%) of Conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic)
- 38 acres (7%) of Floodplain and Riparian
- 19 acres (4%) of Deciduous Shrubland
- 1 acre (0.1%) of Deciduous dominated forest and woodland
- Approximately 45 acres (8%) are used for hay production and much of the remainder is available for cattle grazing (not all is currently used as such)

The property is also included in the large “Anaconda Range to Big Hole, Bitterroot, and Upper Clark Fork Watersheds” Big-Game Habitat Priority Area identified by Secretarial Order 3362. SO 3362 seeks to identify and protect critical migration corridors for ungulates and other wildlife in increasingly fragmented landscapes. The Bitterroot Valley has experienced explosive growth in recent decades that has severely limited connectivity between large blocks of wildlife habitat in the Priority Area, and this fragmentation is expected to continue.

The property contains approximately 3/4 mile of Sweathouse Creek and 1/4 mile of Gash Creek. Gash Creek eventually flows into Sweathouse Creek, which flows into the Bitterroot River (see Figure 2). In Sweathouse Creek, fisheries crews have documented presence of bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and Columbia slimy sculpin, along with nonnative brook trout, brown trout, and rainbow trout. They have also documented Rocky Mountain tailed frog and western toad.

9. Project Level Criteria

a) Site-Specific Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.

The 2015 SWAP identifies the Bitterroot-Clark Fork Riparian Corridor as high priority habitat for many state Species of Greatest Conservation Need, including 2 amphibian, 2 reptile, 23 bird, and 11 mammal species (Table 1). The property offers a combination of mixed conifer-deciduous forest, riparian areas, and grassland/shrubland foothills, offering habitat for a variety of nongame species as well as winter range habitat for elk and mule deer. Aspen stands are common and provide critical resources for both game and nongame animals.

On a two-hour site visit in May 2019, ruffed grouse, bluebirds, elk, white-tailed deer, meadowlarks, hairy woodpeckers, and geese were observed on or near the property (Figure 8). The landowners have also observed pileated woodpeckers, Lewis's woodpeckers, and a variety of other songbirds and woodpeckers using the property.

b) Threat Status: IMMIMENT - 10 pts:

The population of the Bitterroot Valley continues to grow. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Ravalli County grew 14% between 2000 and 2010, and is currently believed to have grown an additional 6% by 2017 (from 36,070 people in 2000 to an estimated 42,563 in 2017). The area is popular with commuters traveling to and from Missoula and Hamilton as well as retirees. Many larger private properties are seasonal homes, while some large agricultural operations still exist, including several operations immediately east of the Hackett Ranch. The Hackett family has observed nearly all the acreage surrounding the property being developed into homesites in recent decades.

If not acquired as a conservation easement, we believe the most likely threat to this property would be development into multiple large home sites, almost certainly with restricted public access for hunting or recreation, as has been the case with adjacent private lands. This type of development would further fragment critical habitats in the Bitterroot Valley.

c) Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.

Describe as follows:

- **Does the proposal occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts)**
100% of the proposed conservation easement is within the Tier I Bitterroot-Clark Fork Riparian Corridor Focal Area.
- **Is this proposal part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts)**
The property is included in the “Anaconda Range to Big Hole, Bitterroot, and Upper Clark Fork Watersheds” Big Game Habitat Priority Area as identified by Secretarial Order 3362.
- **Does the proposal comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts)**
No.

- **Is the proposal within an identified priority area in a species or multi-species conservation plan? (3 pts)**

See above for information on the importance of this property for both migratory big game as well as nongame species (SWAP 2015, S.O. 3362).

- **Does the proposal support an identified connectivity area/corridor? (3 pts)**

The property is part of both the Tier I SWAP Focal Area (important migratory corridor for birds) as well as the Big Game Habitat Priority Area for migratory big game. The property entirely encompasses the mouth of Sweathouse Canyon, supporting a natural funnel whereby species can enter the Bitterroot Valley from expansive BNF lands adjacent to the property. These areas of the Bitterroot Valley are increasingly targeted as high value areas to build houses and cabins and as each canyon mouth is further developed, species lose the ability to travel safely from the rugged, high elevations of the Bitterroot Mountain Front to the broad Bitterroot River floodplain.

d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.

The 540 acres proposed for conservation easement are configured in a single block that contains access to the Sweathouse Falls trail as well as open foothill habitat for hunting and recreating. The property is immediately adjacent to the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) along its western boundary (see maps), essentially expanding the conservation footprint of the BNF into the foothills of the Bitterroot Valley. There are a few smaller, isolated properties to the south held in conservation easements with Five Valleys Land Trust and the Bitter Root Land Trust, though the nearest of these is approximately 2.5 miles from the Hackett Ranch.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.

The ranch is currently enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program, offering access for fall big game/turkey and spring turkey hunting. Legal access to the property is via the Sweathouse Creek Road. We anticipate future hunting access would mirror what currently exists, which is sign-in box registration and a weapons restriction for the agricultural fields on the east side of the property (i.e. shotgun, muzzleloader, handgun, archery). Fishing opportunity also exists for Sweathouse and Gash Creeks.

In addition, the property provides the primary access point to the Sweathouse Falls trail, which is highly popular with the public. The trail is an easy 4-mile round-trip hike to a large, stunning waterfall (Figure 4). The Hackett family has allowed parking and public access on their property without an official easement with the BNF. The trail and the falls are featured in BNF's "Hikes in the Bitterroot National Forest" pamphlet provided to forest visitors.

f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.**

This conservation easement will likely require inclusion of a grazing agreement south of Sweathouse Creek. The landowners currently employ rest-rotational grazing on several pastures, which includes permitted grazing on the adjacent BNF (there is no boundary fence). Additionally, there is some uncertainty about mineral rights; the Hacketts own the mineral rights to the large gravel pit (visible in the upper middle of Figure 1) and believe that this site will not be operational for much longer. However, there may be other entities involved with mineral rights elsewhere on the property.

The landowners are currently managing the timbered portions of the forest with selective thinning (primarily to reduce beetle and wildfire risk; Figures 9-10) in cooperation with NRCS. Forest management will likely be an ongoing need for this property. They have also been actively controlling weeds, especially knapweed, although they have also identified blueweed on the property and are fighting to eradicate it.

Currently, the only structures that exist on the property are barns and outbuildings. The landowners would like to reserve the right to develop one home site, located just north of the main parking area, to encompass 1-2 acres (Figures 1, 7, and 8).

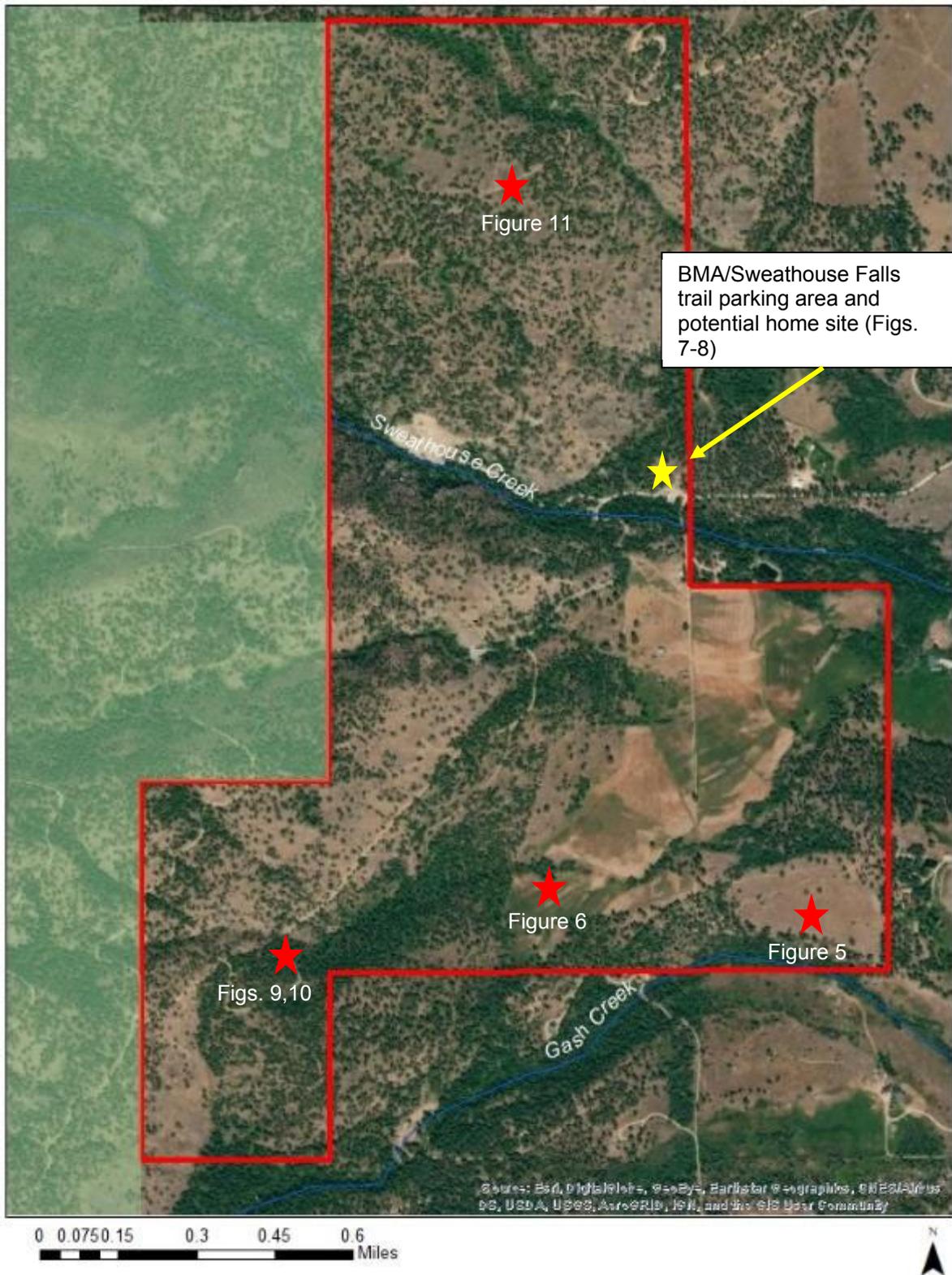


Figure 1. Aerial view of the Hackett Ranch (proposed Sweathouse Creek CE) showing boundary and adjacent land use. Area shaded in green is Bitterroot National Forest. Sweathouse Creek runs below the gravel pit visible in center of parcel.

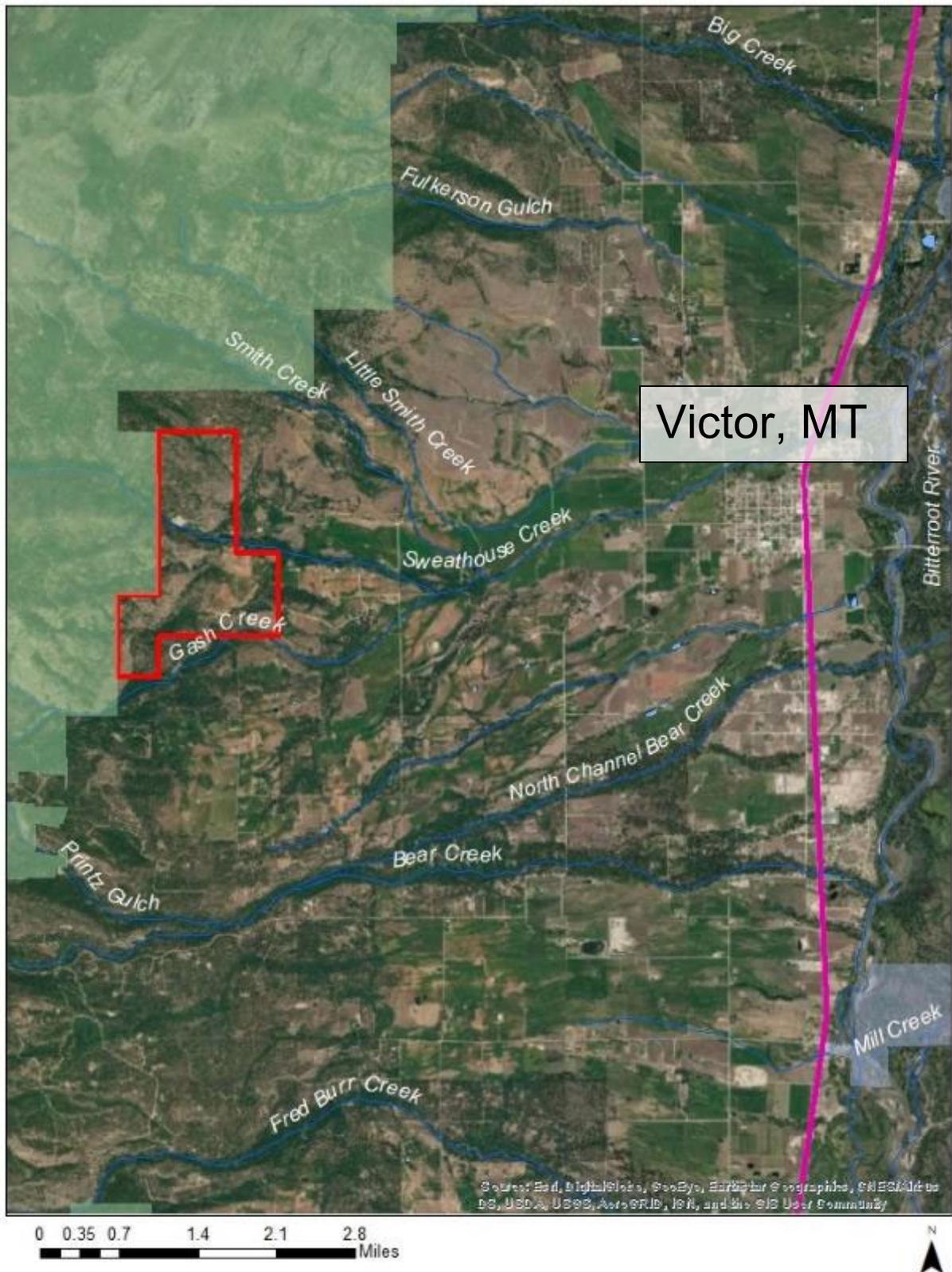


Figure 2. Vicinity map of proposed Sweathouse Creek CE. Green shading is Bitterroot National Forest; blue shading is Montana State-owned lands. All else is private land. Bitterroot River visible on east side of map. Pink line is U.S. Highway 93.

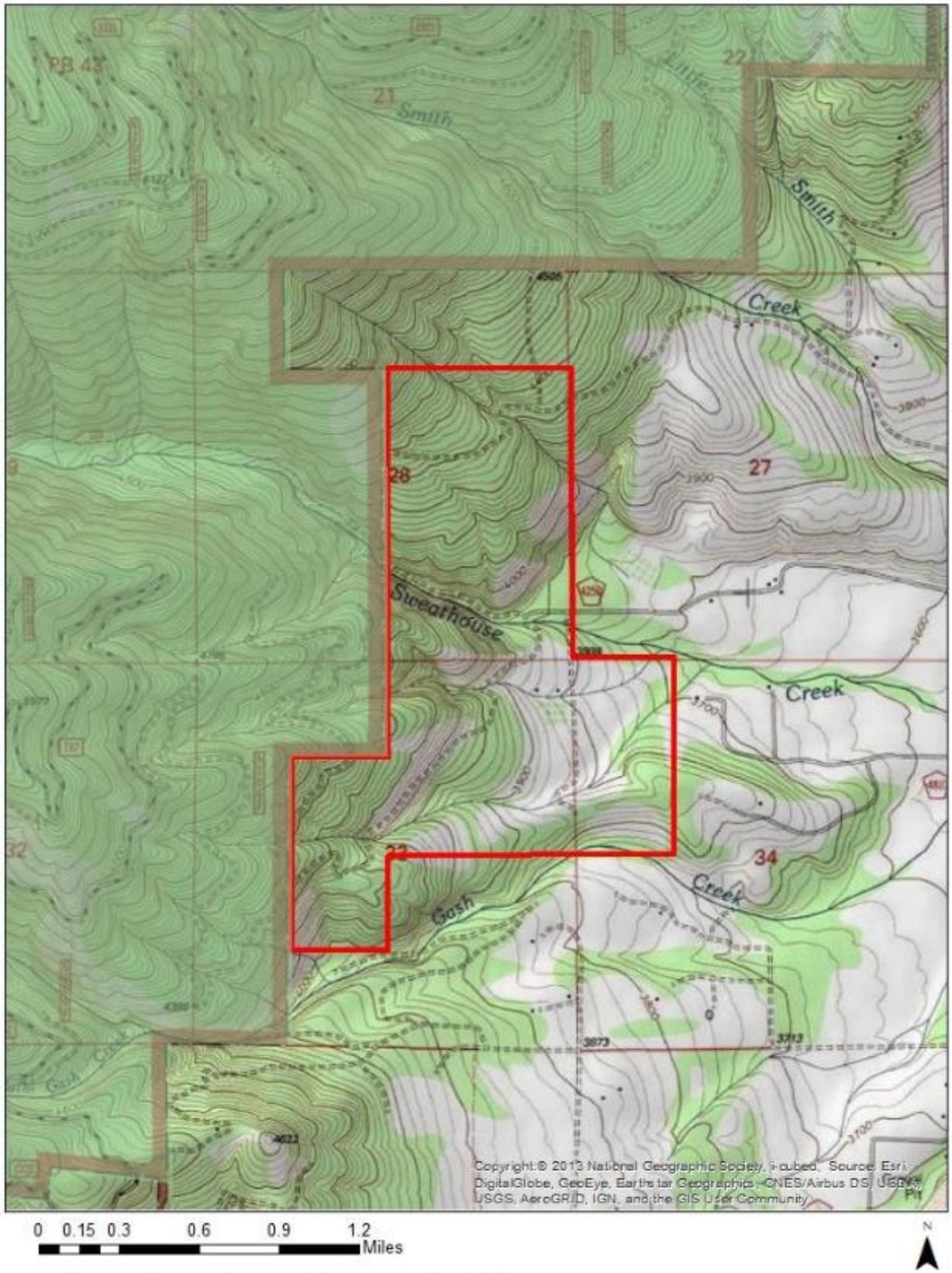


Figure 3. Topographic map of proposed Sweathouse Creek CE.



Figure 4. Photo of Sweathouse Falls, taken by R. Mowry in spring 2015.



Figure 5. Meadow on southeast corner of property. Looking southeast. These meadows are important foraging areas for elk and deer and are relatively rare in the Bitterroot Valley due to their attractiveness for home sites (such as the one visible on the adjacent property).



Figure 6. Meadows, shrubby draws, and aspen stands on south-central part of property provide a diversity of habitat types for songbirds, woodpeckers, and both large and small mammals. View looking northeast.



Figure 7. Parking lot for BMA and Sweathouse Falls trail; possible home site to the right. Looking west.



Figure 8. Possible home site, toward right side of Figure 7.



Figure 9 (above) and 10 (below). Ponderosa pine forest on western edge of property. These forested areas provide security cover for big game animals looking to forage in the open meadows in the lower elevations.





Figure 11. Meadow and forest on north side of property.



Figure 12. Elk herd observed on property in April 2019. Barn in background. S. Hackett photo. Elk are frequently observed using this property especially in the grassy meadows and aspen stands.

Table 1. List of Species of Concern and Potential Species of Concern that would be supported by habitats within the proposed Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement.

Species	Type	MT Status	Confirmed	Suspected	Possible
Bull Trout	Fish	S2	X		
Westslope Cutthroat Trout	Fish	S2	X		
Lewis's Woodpecker	Bird	S2	X		
Black Rosy Finch	Bird	S2		X	
Gray-crowned Rosy Finch	Bird	S2		X	
Western Toad	Amphibian	S2		X	
Coeur d/ Alene Salamander	Amphibian	S2			X
Dwarf Shrew	Mammal	S2			X
Clark's Nutcracker	Bird	S3	X		
Evening Grosbeak	Bird	S3	X		
Cassin's Finch	Bird	S3	X		
Brown Creeper	Bird	S3	X		
Pileated Woodpecker	Bird	S3	X		
Pacific Wren	Bird	S3	X		
Veery	Bird	S3	X		
Varied Thrush	Bird	S3	X		
Bobolink	Bird	S3	X		
Great Blue Heron	Bird	S3	X		
Northern Goshawk	Bird	S3	X		
Golden Eagle	Bird	S3	X		
Bald Eagle	Bird	S3	X		
Peregrine Falcon	Bird	S3		X	
Loggerhead Shrike	Bird	S3		X	
Western Skink	Reptile	S3		X	
Northern Alligator Lizard	Reptile	S3		X	
Wolverine	Mammal	S3		X	
Fisher	Mammal	S3		X	
Little Brown Myotis	Mammal	S3		X	
Townsend's Big-eared Bat	Mammal	S3		X	
Hoary Bat	Mammal	S3		X	
Flammulated Owl	Bird	S3			X
Boreal Owl	Bird	S3			X
Western Screech-owl	Bird	S3			X
Northern Hawk Owl	Bird	S3			X
Great Gray Owl	Bird	S3			X
Pygmy Shrew	Mammal	S3			X
Preble's Shrew	Mammal	S3			X
Hoary Marmot	Mammal	S3			X
Yuma Myotis	Mammal	S3			X
Fringed Myotis	Mammal	S3			X